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ABSTRACT

Some good news and some bad news can be seen in six areas of workplace literacy efforts: awareness, curriculum development, collaboration, staff training, research and evaluation, and funding. The good news includes the following: (1) more highly placed corporation executives are becoming aware of the need for literacy programs; (2) curriculum development is beginning to become more contextual, with a "functional context" approach based on real-world uses of literacy; (3) more collaboration among and between curriculum developers, trade associations, unions, management, and social agencies is taking place; (4) there are more staff training opportunities; (5) some research-based evaluation efforts are being made; and (6) there has been some increase in federal and state funding for workplace basic skills education. Among the bad news is the following: (1) the new awareness of the educational needs at the policy level does not lead to much else; (2) some workplace programs still rely on traditional "workbook" approaches or curricula designed by outside experts with little input from the people in the workplace; (3) there is little guidance on how to "collaborate"; (4) staff training opportunities are still scattered; (5) too little research is being conducted before workplace programs are started; and (6) resources are still limited. Employers should wake up, analyze their problems, find well-trained help in implementing programs, and make a long-term commitment to workplace literacy. (KC)

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Good News and Bad News
About Workplace Literacy Efforts in the United States

Keynote Address
by Paul Jurmo
at
the JTPA Workplace Literacy Forum

San Antonio, Texas
May 3, 1991

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INTRODUCTION:

Those of us working in this new thing we call the "workplace literacy field" need opportunities like this to learn from each other and in the process build our leadership skills . So I want to thank the organizers of this conference for putting this event together. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk with you today. I've been asked to present my views on "the corporate role in workplace literacy."

I'd like to divide my remarks into two parts. I'll begin by describing some promising developments in workplace literacy as well as some dangers which we need to watch out for. I'll wind up with some recommendations for those employers who have an interest -- or <u>should</u> have an interest -- in setting up effective employee basic skills programs.

THE GOOD NEWS AND THE BAD NEWS:

So let me get on with my interpretation of "promising developments and dangers to watch out for." Or, put another way, I'll give you "the good news and the bad news" about workplace literacy. I'll focus on six areas: awareness, curriculum development, collaboration, staff training, research and evaluation, and funding.

<u>Awareness:</u> One piece of good news is that, among policy makers in business, labor, and government, there has been a clear increase in

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awareness of the employee basic skills issue. Policy makers have been reading Workforce 2000, ASTD's Workplace Basics, the AFL-CIO's Worker-Centered Learning guidebook, and the America's Choice report, as well as the newsletters of the Business Council for Effective Literacy where many of these reports have been summarized. When they read their morning newspaper, or their business magazines or trade journals, or watch televised news reports, policy makers are also likely to come across stories on how important employee basic skills is for companies which are trying to turn themselves into "high performance organizations."

As a result of all this reporting on the issue, literacy is no longer solely the concern of low-literate adults and the few people who have tried to provide literacy services. And workplace literacy is now talked about in institutions which never paid much attention to it before: in corporate board rooms and labor unions, in federal institutions like the Department of Labor and the Small Business Administration, and in Governors' offices.

That, I think, is good news, but only if it represents a step toward real solutions to the problem. The bad news is that too often this new awareness at the policy-making level doesn't lead to much else. The employee basic skills issue is now in fact being put on hold as policy makers wrestle with government budget crises, decreased corporate revenues, and -- in the case of labor -- dwindling union membership. Among policy makers, awareness too often stays at a superficial level of saying "Yes, there is a problem and something needs to be done about it." Sometimes policy makers will go a step further and say, "Yes, let's look into the issue a bit and maybe set up some kind of pilot project."

But, overall, not enough hard thinking is going into really understanding the employee basic skills problem or developing appropriate solutions. So the good news is that awareness has been increased among businesses, public policy makers, unions, and the general public, but the down side is that awareness is nowhere near as broad or deep as it needs to be, and it's not being followed up with enough effective action.

Curriculum development: There is some good news to report on the curriculum development front. The principle of "contextualization" has taken hold, and almost every workplace literacy report now cites the "functional context approach" as the guiding light for effective practice. No longer are many people content with merely walking into a workplace with a traditional fill-in-the-blanks workbook and calling it a "workplace literacy program."

Proponents of the "functional context" approach argue that learners learn best when instruction is based on real-world, meaningful uses of literacy taken from the contexts in which they live and work. This is good news if it means that workplace educators are focusing on creating more-meaningful instructional practice. In practice, however, this principle of "contextualization" is being interpreted in many ways, some more effective than others.

Some creative practitioners have built on not only the workplace research of people like Tom Sticht but on contextualized instructional practice developed in other settings like community-based adult education programs and in school-level reading, writing, and language programs. These educators have set up workplace learning situations in which learners strengthen their abilities to think critically, work in teams, and apply oral and written language to carry out real-world tasks. Learners do this in the classroom by working in problem-solving teams modelled after the collaborative work formats now seen as the core of "high-performance organizations." Two programs here in Texas, run by El Paso Community College and Southwest Texas State University, are moving in this direction.

These broad-thinking workplace educators try to avoid the mistake of "defining the context" in too quick, too artificial a manner. They use a collaborative curriculum development approach, not only consulting higher-level workplace managers for their ideas of what the workers need to learn, but also involving shop-floor supervisors, union representatives, and -- most importantly -- workers themselves.

This collaborative approach is not an easy one, because it takes time, patience, and a cooperative spirit to get people together, to listen to what the various interest groups see as the goals of the program, and then create a curriculum which builds on the positive motivations and knowledge base of all concerned. Although this is not an easy process, it holds great promise for not only creating meaningful curricula but also getting all the key players to buy into the program: They are more likely to support the process if they understand how the program relates to their interests.

This systematic, collaborative approach is in contrast to one in which the "context" and curriculum are defined by an outside "expert" who swoops in to perform a one-shot "literacy audit," ignoring the broader interests and strengths of the many parties who could benefit from the program.

So, on the curriculum development front, the good news is that innovative workplace programs are developing curricula which

respond to the many complex interests represented in a modern workplace. The bad news is that some workplace programs still rely on traditional, de-contextualized "workbook" approaches, while other programs are putting their faith in curricula developed primarily by outside experts with little input or investment on the part of the people in the workplace who will be most impacted by the program and whose active participation is vital if the program is going to work.

Collaboration: I've already touched on a third area where there is good news to report. In this case, I'm talking about the increasing emphasis on "collaboration." Let me give you some examples from around the country and from Texas itself:

-- National trade associations are now pooling the resources of entire industries like banking, printing, and construction to create and disseminate basic skills curricula for workers in those industries.

-- At a local level, hotels in Arlington, VA have joined forces with the Adult Basic Education program to set up a system to link hotel employees with ESL instructors.

-- In Hartford, Connecticut a half-dozen major companies have formed an Alliance with the local community college. This coalition provides basic skills services for employees in those companies and for unemployed Hartford residents trying to qualify for better jobs.

-- Here in Texas, El Paso Community College is heading up a consortium of 30 or so community colleges from around the state. This consortium will run staff training programs and other activities aimed at building the capacities of those colleges to provide quality workplace literacy services.

-- Also in Texas-- in the Austin area-- the Rural Capital Area Private Industry Council this past March organized a two- day conference for literacy educators, job-trainers, employers, union representatives, social-service people, and others involved in literacy efforts in the nine rural counties surrounding Austin. The PIC recognized that coordination of services is particularly difficult in rural areas. So this conference was aimed at helping people from each of the

counties to sit down and talk with each other -- sometimes for the first time ever -- to map out strategies for better coordinating and otherwise strengthening literacy services in their respective counties.

-- Elsewhere -- in New York, Chicago, and other communities -- labor unions have formed consortia to sponsor staff-training, fund-development, and other support services to unions operating basic skills programs for their members.

-- And, until recently, the Massachusetts Workplace Education Initiative used a carrot-and-stick approach to be sure that the local workplace education programs it funded were collaborative in nature. The "stick" was a funding requirement that each program be managed by a multi-sector team composed of representatives from management, the labor union, the education institution involved, and the Private Industry Council. The "carrot" in Massachusetts was technical assistance provided by Initiative staff to help those workplace partnerships work.

So the good news in all these examples is that the notion of collaborative planning and coordination has taken hold in the field and is actively being developed by a wide range of types of institutions. These institutions recognize that collaboration can help stretch limited resources, spread good ideas, and build a political constituency for quality workplace education services.

The bad news is that being an active member of a coalition or other collaborative effort often means more work for the potential partners. Because this is a new area, it is often not clear just what one does when one is "collaborating." It often means that you have to take time away from the work you need to be doing back home in your own program.

Collaboration sounds good in principle, but those being told to "collaborate" need guidance in how to do it well. They also have to be able to devote the time and spirit required to learn how to work with people with different backgrounds and interests. The bad news here is that the right combinations of technical assistance, time, and good will required to create effective partnerships are currently in short supply.

Staff training: Key to making all of these "good" things" work is well-trained, well-supported staff. In this case, I define "staff"

broadly to include not only adult educators, but the managers, union representatives, learners, funders, and others who have roles in putting together solid programs.

At this time, there are only limited opportunities for any of these key players to learn how to perform their roles better. There are now a half-dozen or so guidebooks on how to set up an employee basic skills program, and there are also more and more articles on workplace education appearing in adult education and training journals. But these materials are often not easily accessible to the people who could benefit from them.

It's only recently that conferences like these had special workplace literacy "tracks" which gave those with an interest in workplace education the opportunity to participate in more than one or two sessions on the topic. And while there are now some more-in-depth training and consulting services being provided to workplace educators, many of them are expensive or geographically or otherwise inaccessible to those who need guidance.

So the good news here is that there are more and more training opportunities for those with roles to play in workplace basic education. But the bad news is that those opportunities are scattered, they often don't go into much depth, and they are not as accessible as they should be.

Research and evaluation: Another question to deal with is: what are the actual basic skills needs of various industries and how is what actually goes on in workplace education programs being documented and evaluated? I do have some good news to report in these areas of research and evaluation.

I am working with a three-member team on a two-pronged project in Massachusetts. One member of the team is documenting and analyzing the curricula used in employee basic skills programs in that state. The other two of us are carrying out a combined outcome-study and organizational-development project. We are working with teams from eight workplace programs to first define what it is the various partners want to get out of their programs, and then develop user-friendly questionnaires, simulations, and other evaluation tools which the partners can use to determine what in fact is being achieved in the programs. We are consciously trying to find more-meaningful measures of program effectiveness while at the same time strengthening each team's abilities to manage their own programs.

This, I feel, is a piece of good news. The bad news is that there are too few such attempts to pinpoint the actual basic skills needs in

various workplace contexts and to document and assess what is actually going on in workplace programs. Is, for example, the university research community in Texas using its resources to study the particular basic skills needs of workers in the oil industry or in the assembly plants which have sprung up along the southern border? What we should be avoiding is the current situation where too many of those getting into workplace education are forced to "fly blindly" without a research base or planning and evaluation instruments to guide them.

New funding sources: On the funding front, there has in recent years been some increase in federal and state funding for workplace basic skills education. As I said earlier, a few trade associations have invested money in developing basic skills resources for their industries, and more and more individual businesses are committing some resources to investigate the employee basic skills question and in some cases actually set up programs. There are also creative attempts to pool resources through the collaborative efforts I described earlier, and to draw on existing sources like JTPA which were not traditionally available for workplace literacy education.

But despite these increases in resources, the resources overall remain pretty limited. It's going to be hard to develop quality services with part-timers operating on short-term funding. Everyone -- both in the public and private sectors -- rationalizes this lack of resources with terms like "deficit-reduction" and "recession." These are economic problems which we as a nation have gotten ourselves into and which we in the workplace education field have to contend with.

But I think that another reason that money is not forthcoming is that many of those who control the purse-strings are not yet convinced that investing in workplace basic skills is worth it. In part that's due to their lack of understanding about the complexities of putting together good programs. In part, though, it's because higher-ups also don't understand the value of a solid employee education effort. Put another way: those of us who are trying to build new and improved mousetraps in this field have not yet been able to show the world what we can do.

I guess we'll just have to stick with it, and support each other, and meanwhile encourage the powers-that-be to wake up to the need to invest in effective solutions to our economic and social problems.

WHAT EMPLOYERS SHOULD BE DOING:

I was asked to focus in particular on the "corporate role" in workplace literacy. So let me now wrap up with some recommendations which are targeted in particular at employers but which I think are relevant to the rest of you adult educators, job trainers, union people, public policy makers, and others represented here today.

My first recommendation is aimed at those employers who haven't been paying attention the employee basic skills issue. I have many words to say to you, but I will say just three of them: PLEASE WAKE UP!

Second, for the rest of you employers -- employers like the ones here today -- who <u>are</u> aware that the basic skills of your employees are something you might have to be concerned about, my advice is: Do your homework. Find out how the analysis of the problem has evolved in recent years and look at the kinds of model programs I described earlier. Realize that there now <u>is</u> experience which you can build on and that you don't have to start from scratch. Understand that an effective employee basic skills effort requires hard thinking, a collaborative spirit, commitment, and well-trained help.

Please don't settle for a quick-fix solution proposed to you by someone who may have little real understanding of what you need or of what goes into an effective program. Understand that what appear to be "employee basic skills problems" might in fact be due to poorly-written workplace documents or due to a management system which -- by ignoring what employees already know -- discourages workers from using the skills they already have. These are management-related problems rather than employee literacy problems, and should be dealt with accordingly.

As taxpayers, don't let your public policy makers be penny wise and pound foolish. Look at what is happening now to the Massachusetts Initiative I referred to earlier. There -- in the name of deficit reduction -- the planning, coordination, and technical assistance functions of that model statewide effort have now been largely eliminated. Grants <u>will</u> continue to be made to new workplace programs in that state, but it's not clear that -- without guidance from experienced workplace educators -- the recipients will

know how to make good use of the funds. I only pick on Massachusetts because I am now working on a contract there, but I'm afraid we'd find similar examples in too many other government agencies at this point in time.

Internally -- within your own organizations -- employers shouldn't make that same mistake of not recognizing what an effective, sustained effort requires. It's not enough for employers to accept seed money from the government to get an employee basic skills program going but then let the project shrivel up when the government grant runs out.

I guess that what I am recommending is that you employers should take a "systems approach" to the employee basic skills problem. You should see it as part of a larger human resources problem facing not only your own workplace but our nation as a whole. You should recognize that, to solve the problem, you have to team up with various interest groups within your organization to plan and carry out a well-conceived effort. And you need to recognize that you have much to gain if you can draw on the larger system of fellow employers, government agencies, and other institutions beyond the walls of your workplace who share an interest in workplace education.

But I have to admit that, in many cases, there isn't really much of a "system" out there for you to work with. This is where you can put your influence to good use. As individual employers and as members of trade and professional associations, you need to become advocates for the creation of resources which will help you meet your needs. You should not only be lobbying public policy makers, but you should be telling your universities that they should be creating training programs for workplace educators. And you might get together with other people in your industries to investigate what your workplaces need and develop resources to meet those particular needs.

As employers, you need to "take the <u>long</u> view." Don't be myopic and look only at current jobs and forget that workers should be preparing for cross-training, teamwork, and other future responsibilities requiring more than just one set of discrete "skills." Also recognize that an education program which really helps employees to think and act collaboratively can serve the larger

society in which we live and the democracy which we too often neglect.

My final recommendation is aimed not just at employers but at all of the rest of us in this room who are now essentially trying to create a new field called "workplace basic skills." My recommendation is: Be a leader. Don't take a re-active stance and wait for resources to be created for you; be pro-active and make things happen. As a people we now need leaders, and the development of the human resources in our workplaces is one good place where we can take a lead.

Thank you.